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Ray

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Ray

by Sue Kenney



Ray's been with me a long time. Over 10 years now. There is something oddly comforting about seeing Ray in my classroom year after year, rock steady, ever silent, durably supportive. Ray is what I call the desk that bears his name. A number of years ago, (I have no idea how many), a student who attended the all-girls Catholic high school where I teach, carved the name Ray into her desk – a radical act, even by today's standards. Ours is a traditional school; the classrooms are clean, the grounds are well manicured, and the tiled floors seem perennially polished. Don't get me wrong; I'm not condoning vandalism. It's just that every time I look at Ray, I think about the girl who carved his name, and wonder whatever became of their story.

Why was Ray immortalized in such a primitive fashion? What kind of crazy, defiant, courageous love inspires a young woman to risk detention or even suspension? Pen is easily spritzed away and even permanent marker disappears over time. Knives have a certain permanence to them, though. Carving is a primal act, something that beckons us to reveal what is hidden. Something we might imagine our ancestors doing – carving canoes out of bark, carving cathedrals out of stone. We carve initials in trees, sure. But usually there are two sets, or two names. SA loves RT. Or Sammi and Ray forever. Of course, the girl couldn't very well engrave her own name next to his without revealing herself as the culprit. Ray was destined to float alone on that little island of wood.

But Ray may not have been a love interest at all. Maybe he's a cousin, the one she used to squeeze next to at the kids' table every Thanksgiving, who was recently deployed to Afghanistan. Or maybe he was her best friend in second grade; the one whose parents, she was shocked to learn, got

deported over the summer. He could have been the milky-skinned, red-headed boy who used to draw fish all over his notebooks in grammar school, who everyone thought was a weirdo. Maybe she had always meant to be a better friend to him, and felt the leaden yoke of guilt when she learned of his suicide at only 15-years-old.

It could be, too, that the girl's connection to Ray was even more personal. He could have been her younger brother, who was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer. Maybe she thought about him relentlessly. Maybe carving his name in her desk was not even a conscious act, but rather, one that sprang from her constant plea to God or the universe, *please let him be okay, please let him be okay*. Maybe she struggled in school because there was not enough space in her innermost geography to contain her prayers, her sorrow, her worry - not only about Ray, but also about what his death would mean to her parents, her siblings, and herself, and *still* have enough energy left for her essay on Thomas Payne.

The reason I'm drawn to Ray, I think, the reason I look for him every September when the new school year starts, is that he reminds me that my students come into my classroom with their own distinct lives, far different from mine and everyone else's. They have their loves, their sorrows, their difficulties and their joys. They have insoluble dilemmas and unanswered prayers. And sometimes, when they seem to be hovering over a distant world, it might be okay to let them drift a bit, without slamming them immediately back to the classroom reality. There will be time, there will be time, as T.S. Eliot reminds us. The school year is long; there are many opportunities to shepherd students back and engage them meaningfully with the texts they are loving, tolerating, hating, or flailing their way through. No doubt, learning is important. It's important too, though, to remember that our students live complex lives that don't always fit into our standard image of the ideal learner. We must discern that which is hidden, and carve a figurative space for the many constellations of Rays in our students' lives.

Sue Kenney is an English teacher at Immaculate Heart Academy in the Township of Washington, NJ. She earned a Doctor of Letters from Drew University in 2015, and is starting a study of Narrative Medicine at Columbia University this spring. Kenney volunteers for First Friends, an immigrants' rights advocacy group. Her work also appeared in the Spring 2018 edition of the *New Jersey English Journal*.